



Habitable Cars: what we do there

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A room for roaming

Two seats and a small sofa all facing forwards. The three piece suite of the conventionally designed car. A little living room. It is supplied with a stereo for playing music and a radio. More commonly now, DVD players for the occupants of the sofa. No curtains. No coffee table. Not much in the way of shelves. No room to walk around; sitting is all there is on offer. A lot of windows though, and a lot of doors. The view from the windows changes pretty much constantly as does where you will alight if you leave by one of the doors. It is hard to write there and conversation can be difficult when traffic noise intrudes. The neighbours are always changing, sometimes they're teenagers, sometimes they're families, sometimes lone men and sometimes buses. They can be nuisances at times and almost never come round for a cup of sugar. A little living room that is hardly like a living room at all. The car interior. Its chairs and windows have been a constant feature of my life as I'm sure they have been for most of us here today. Early memories of staring at the windscreen wipers creating their distinctive asymmetrical shapes on the windscreen. The clunk of car doors. The smell of vinyl seating. Teenage kicks in a rusty runaround. Near misses and accidents. Conversations about love, death and insurance. Beloved offspring kicking the backs of the seats. Old age arriving in the persistent urge to drive well below the speed limit on the motorway. So much of life is there in that second smallest room, sitting side by side, with a road ahead.

In the social sciences having spent a hundred years or so considering the citizen, the consumer, the professional, the scientist and so on, we have just begun to think about the driver (Miller 2001). Re-applying our almost worn-out categories of gender, race, class, age, and power to see how they are inflected and briefly renewed through being behind the wheel. Of all these gender has had the greatest force in reconsidering the car, from Henry Ford's purchase of an electric car for his wife Clara that prevented her from roaming too far from the home via wider thoughts on women's struggles to gain equal mobility (Scharff 1991) to the daily jibes and psychology quackery about women drivers and their abilities. From time to time the feminist-informed critiques of car design spur the automobile industry into action.

[slides]

The most recent example being Concept Lab Volvo's YCC car 'designed by women for women'¹ requiring almost no maintenance, extra space for 'stuff' beside the driver, cinema folding seats in the rear, the inevitable parking manoeuvre assistance, natty gull wing doors and a keyless sensor for opening them. What was rather nice was that having identified these as notionally the needs of women, it turned out that their male marketing subjects wanted them just as much. Looking at the YCC you can see that designing cars for women has come a long way since Ford's electric vehicle. The

¹ <http://www.volvocars.com/AboutVolvo/conceptlab/>

redesigning and rebuilding of our cities for cars has gone a great deal further (Thrift 2004).

Beyond social explanations of car design, adoption and use, the driver topicalises the mobile technological subject. Realising that before the cyborgs of science fiction come to exist (or not) we already have one sort of machine-augmented human subject in the combination of car and person that is your ubiquitous driver (Michael 2001). Drivers can move faster, carry heavy loads and survive impacts that would crush flesh and bone alone. With augmentation or extension of human ground-speed, strength and load carrying come a series of more subtle transformations. And with the establishment of motorways and their equivalents after WW2, new forms of disciplinary apparatus are brought to bear on the new population that are motorway drivers (MERRIMAN Forthcoming): ‘stay alert!’ ‘Don’t drive slowly!’ and ‘Don’t picnic!’. As an affective transformation of practice, driving differentially equips and engages human bodies with the sensed world in longstanding and new ways and re-arranges emotional investments (SHELLER 2004). In the steel cage of the car John Urry (2004) warns that reciprocal eye contact, the intimate contact that is retained between pedestrians in the city is lost and anonymity and scripting of action increase². Strapped into moulded chairs the kinaesthetics of bodily movement in space dwindle to drivers bumming and pedalling their way around the city.

Drawing on Jack Katz (1999) amongst others Nigel Thrift (2004) makes a persuasive argument that automobility has ‘produced its own embodied practices of driving and ‘passenger’ing’, each with their own distinctive histories waiting to be written’. What studying the practices of driving as against the identities of drivers might look like we can get a feel for in the work of Jack Katz, Tim Dant and Oskar Juhlin. In their recent research they have begun what we might call a natural history of driving on the road. Juhlin and his interdisciplinary group at the *mobility studio* have produced ethnographies of the road which, not only have made us realise that the experience of the road varies dramatically according to whether you are a biker, trucker, parent with children or cruising the strip or, even, a road inspector, but they have also fed into novel applications such as high speed identity sharing (hocman), back-seat gaming, music sampling between passing vehicles (soundpryer) and organising work between highly distributed members of a road repair crew (placememo). Meanwhile the sociologist and ethnographer Jack Katz has brought our attention to the moods and explosions of emotion on the roads in LA in his increasingly influential work. Finally Tim Dant (2002) has drawn attention to the vital and object-centred work of car maintenance and the phenomenology of driving (Dant 2004). At the LSE Daniele Pica, Carsten Sorenson and Silvia Elaluf Calderwood are looking at policework and taxi-driving’s relationship to the car and the array of new technologies on the dashboard.

Returning to Nigel Thrift’s comments on driving, in his argument he goes on to suggest that surely it would be possible to produce a rich phenomenology of automobility which, as I read it, could render not only what driving, for particular cohorts, consists of but also, and as importantly, what, as he puts it, ‘passenger’ing consists of. For all its metaphorical possibilities the individual driver behind the wheel has attracted almost all

² In his unpublished research on driving instruction, Oskar Juhlin notes precisely the opposite. Leaner drivers were instructed to look closely at the faces of pedestrians and other drivers to gauge their intentions.

our attention while the passenger has sat un-noticed in the back seat of the first traffic wave of ethnographies on and of the road.

[slide]

In the 'Habitable Cars' project which we have recently begun at Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities, funded by the ESRC, our plan is investigate contemporary *living* in the car³. We are, in other words, considering how various populations of drivers and passengers *dwell* on the road and through their dwelling produce habitable spaces of transport⁴. Our study is a close examination of *the social activities that have emerged and those that have increasingly been displaced into the car*. Over the next two years we are going to look at two broad forms of car sharing, firstly, and primarily, the predominant form, where a number of a people travel together in the same vehicle at the same time (e.g. a family doing a school run, friends on a daytrip, work commuters, old folks going shopping) and secondly where the same vehicle is utilised sequentially by a number of people (e.g. car share schemes, hire cars, taxis).

By way of ultra brief methodological introduction we have a 'follow and film' approach, or what Hayden Lorimer (2002) calls a 'driving with' methodology. Basically we, or rather one of us, usually me, spends a week or so hitching along with the cars we are interested in, whenever they can fit us in, and, then a week or so either filming them or having them film themselves. Over the next 18 months we are planning to film in 18 vehicles.

In what follows I can only really sketch out some preliminary notions that are coming out of the first month's fieldwork on the habitable cars project. What I can and will do is talk briefly about parents (nearly always mums, though sometimes nannies or dads) doing the 'school run'. Calling it the school run already loses so much of the work involved. It is all sorts of running. After that I'll draw on some pilot work we did on friends off daytripping together.

Running family

In the popular imagination the school run is characterised as the mildly selfish decision of a parent to drive their child or children to school when they could potentially walk or take a school bus. From the fieldwork we've done so far it is immediately striking that parents are doing so much more than some simple back and forth trip to the school gates.

It is not unusual for parent A to be taking their children and parent B's children to school in the same run. It is not unusual for parent A to be taking child X to nursery and child Y to a primary school somewhere else. It is not unusual for parent B to be collecting parent A's child from school because parent A dropped them that morning.

³ http://web.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/habitable_cars/

⁴ Historical treatments can be found in Pooley, Colin. 2003. "Mobility in the twentieth century: substituting commuting for migration." Pp. 80-96 in *Geographies of British Modernity*, edited by D Gilbert, D Matless, and B Short. Oxford: Blackwell.

It is not unusual for parent A to do Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays while parent B does Tuesdays and Wednesdays. It is not unusual for a parent C with her children, V & W, to be involved as well. It is not unusual for parent A to be taking their husband or wife to the railway station on the way to the school. It is not unusual for parent A to be doing grocery shopping at a supermarket near the school gates after dropping off child X. It is not unusual for child Z to be sick and need collecting from school mid afternoon. It is not unusual for parent B to collect parent A's children from school and then give them dinner before parent A finally collects them from parent B's house. It is not unusual to *be* confused by school runs.

How on earth do they organise all this you might now ask? Well we hope you ask since that is certainly one of our project's concerns. One of the things you come up against is the phenomenal field properties of each and every journey (Garfinkel 2002: chapter 5). Running the family around in the car is not making journeys of the imagination, they are daily enterprises of getting the children out of the house, setting off in time, collecting B from her house, driving this familiar road, traffic not moving ahead, trying this short-cut, stopping that hair pulling, turning the CD player down, making sure packed lunches are not left behind and more.

You also come up against the recurrent checking on whose turn is it this afternoon to collect the kids from school? When does school finish today? Who am I collecting tomorrow? It really *is* a bad thing if a child is left standing outside the school gate uncollected. And it *will* have been someone's accountable duty to have collected that child at 3.30pm on *this* Tuesday and taken them home or to an after-school club.

What I think is overlooked in dismissals of the school run are the many mutual obligations, the favours, the work, the trust, the aid and the generosity. Also the ways in which mums doing these runs do so as economically and efficiently as possible. They fill their cars with children in as much as they can, on the same trip they fill them with groceries and manage to drop in on the gym or for a coffee or similar. And if you have children yourself you'll know this is dirty smelly work and any clean car smell there might have been will have long since been smothered by the trashy odour of banana skins, yogurt and decaying trainers that go with running kids to school.

Let's look a little more closely at activities emerging during the trip, since as many social scientists have shown this has become one of the significant moments of spending time with children and not always your own (JONES and BRADSHAW 2000; NIPPERT-ENG 1996). As Laurel Swan and Alex Taylor (ref) note in their fieldwork it's a time when parents have their children trapped with nowhere to run to. Well, and vice versa. And if what so many sociologists of the family say is true about the decline of eating dinner together at a table, then the runs in the car may be our generation's occasion for families to talk to one another about matters of concern.

Let's drop in on this occasion, drop in on a journey and remind ourselves what it looks and sounds like. There are five in the car, the mother and her oldest daughter (Daisy) in the front, her son Josh directly behind in the backseat, Jenny in the middle and her friend out of sight behind Daisy's

chair.



[VIDEO - death.mov]

Death and bereavement. After a discussion about the dangers of smoking the conversation had moved on to deaths and Jenny in the backseat had mentioned that her friend's mum had died and she was the same age as her mum. There are lots of interesting things happening and, of course, weighty subjects being dealt with here, all to the tune of Super Trooper by Abba. The mum uses the discussion to occasion a lesson in being sensitive to other children whose parents have died.

Some of the features of interest here are that the three children maintain three lines of talk, throw in non-sequiters to the supposed topic, and all this is utterly normal. It's unusual for all the children to be participating in the same conversation in fact. Trying to draw all of the children into the same conversation is one of the (good) mum's ongoing challenges. But how to do this if even death doesn't keep their attention! The mum here turns down the volume of Abba though this is partly a response to Daisy in the front having turned it up slightly a few minutes before.

[whistling.mov]

Note that Jenny in the middle, not a family member, whose friend's mother had died now whistles through the moral lesson being given by the mum in the front. When she does manage to reinvolve herself in the conversation later which requires several turn initiations before she finally gets a turn to talk, she shows some notion of maintaining topic by staying on the subject of death. She offers a story of her grandmother's "lucky death" which while displaying a keen understanding of birthdays, misses the mark on tragedy, and the mum turns it neatly into a joke 'oh she got her presents in then'.

What this happens in the midst of is not just any old general space nor in five brains in five bodies in one car. It happens in the midst of the School Run. That is the thing, that is the object, that is the project which is happening. They are not doing cost-benefit analysis nor wayfinding nor game theory nor post modern identity politics. They are making, once more, the familiar run through the well known streets, the short cuts, chicanes, bumps, one way systems, lights and more. The run that has its set destinations – the school and the nursery school. These destinations are always there, looming with their temporal accountability. You cannot get the kids to school roughly before lunch, or in however long it takes to get there or just whenever. They really do have to be there before nine or all kinds of trouble ensue.

And it really isn't five brains in one car, it is three members of a family and children of another family. They transport themselves as a family and its temporary adoptees. How odd would things get if the mother treated her children and her friend's children as strangers or as colleagues? The family, then is the unit of this journey, and, as Harold Garfinkel would say, as the cohort they have their work to do as members of that cohort. They do it in the way of that cohort, in other words, in the way of a family. Given all we know about families what they do is a distinctly accountable matter, their organisation is a highly moral matter. This, then, is not psychology's *individual* making decisions or choices. It is a family that distributes perspectives and duties within it, such as the mother's perspective and moral obligation, the three year old son's perspective and rights, the six year old daughter's perspective and duties, the four year old child and the five year old child in the backseat. The family has an accountability that stretches forward until the death of its members. An event that happened in the car today could be brought up in fifty years time. No wonder then that the mum turns Abba down to discuss how to treat a bereaved child.

What's more there is the car. There's how it is involved in assembling the family doing their run to school. Mum is in the [driver seat], Daisy is on the [right side], Josh is in the [back], poor Jenny is in the [middle]. In the [middle], whoever wanted that horrid position? In the front seat there is the splendid landscape view of the roads and pavements ahead, rears of vehicles ahead, fronts of cars approaching on the other side, lines of parked cars, bus stops, crossings and more. Plenty to watch, plenty that is happening, plenty to do. The seat of the privileged older daughter and oldest of the children in the car today.

[spiderman]

In the [middle] there are the elbows of the other kids on either side, there's no window that's yours for staring out of, for opening and closing. In the middle you have no easy way out of the conversations that the mum might be trying to involve you in, or the 'three year old' Josh. Where three year old conversation can be SO dull to a four-and-a-half year old sometimes. And conversations keep coming up and there is no easy way out and daydreaming is hardly a possibility without a window to daydream with.

There, then, is a flavour of family runs as one journey inhabiting the car.

Tripping friends⁵

A second journey, then, to drop in on to provide some contrast with the first. A journey with a different logic to the school run and a different cohort achieving the enterprise. Let's look at four friends out on a daytrip. Or rather take the front passenger seat and join the passenger's twist around to talk to the other passengers in the rear. There are four in the car this time, all adults



[directions in car]

In view most of the time is one of the friends who's been made the map-reader and navigator on this day out. We hear the friends in the video clip talking about different places and we see the rear seat passengers finding them on the map. In doing so the friends build a joint, that is a shared, short list of the daytrip's geographical features through their conversation. They have recommendations in hand which helps them select a handful of place names from all the possible place names. The set of place terms and predicated activities they produce is one which is tied specifically to what the friends are intending to do: it is a 'car-day-trippers' formulation of a set of locations and leisure activities. Treating what they are doing as a form of representational theorising as many geographers, psychologists and indeed AI researchers, have done, obscures much, if not *just*, what is happening when they consult the map on this journey. That is, how they plan the places on their trip and how they build *just this* plan as part of doing the work of daytripping. The important issue is not imaginary and circuitous connections between the 'real' world and language as a set of symbols or codes, the issue is how they go about building expectations of the road ahead and how their building uses the daytrip as a resource.

[killin]

⁵ Holidaying and day-tripping have the highest average number of car occupants (2.2 persons per vehicle compared to 1.2 for 'business' U.K. Department for Transport. 2002. "Transport Trends." London: Department for Transport.). Multi-occupant journeys tend to be multi-purpose and multi-destinational: a parent's school run being to two different schools and combined with journey to work and doing shopping Jones, Peter, and Ruth Bradshaw. 2000. "The Family and the School Run: What would make a *real* difference?" Pp. 37. London: AA Foundation for Road Safety Research & University of Westminster..

In the short list they produce from their extended talking about their recommended places and what they can find on the roadmap, there are, in the end, only two places. It is the journey, as they trace it out along the single A road northwards that they are travelling on, that *selects* just *two* places. Again they do not select using neural representations nor spatial cognition nor mental maps. They produce a short list tailored to the journey and they are using that journey as a resource. That they are in the midst of and that is organising the appearances of the road ahead. The road ahead and the map are what Garfinkel (2002) calls an oriented object, to remind us that objects are almost without exception analysably ‘this way up’, ‘that way down’, ‘large’, ‘travelling towards us’, ‘to the left of that’, ‘at the end of’ and all manner of orientations we can, and do, find more or less instantly, eventually or never. From the directional properties of their journeying onwards the friends have analysed which place comes first and which is second. The first/second sequence is a transformation from their road map’s relational web of inscribed features, into the order in which they will pass through these places in the car.

In other words the order in which the places come in their list is the order that they will approach them on the road. More resources are at hand since if the pub is the second place they will come to, then this has consequences for planning their lunch and in relation to going for a bracing walk in the Trossachs. What they are assembling, then, is not just where things are, but what they can do at particular places (e.g., that place has a pub) and in what order travelling from ‘here’ they will come upon that place (e.g., it’s our second stop). When the friends are talking they are not only producing a list of place names, they are also working-up a negotiable inventory for the daytrip. There is a set of activities in their discussions that are tied to each place. Each place is described in terms of what day-trippers might do: waterfalls, walks, and a pub. So in describing places, putting them in order, and describing the activities that are available, they produce a plan for their day. Note that at this point in the journey they have not settled on a destination, which also entails that they do not decide which of the activities at this point they will do, only that the places and what they can do there will appear in a certain sequence.

[seewhathappens]

In the backseat the map reading might seem pretty vague and inconclusive, in that the backseat navigators are very tentative about the different places, what happens there and whether they’ll definitely go to them. What we have to realise is that there is more than map reading going on, the group is laying out among themselves what they could do today as friends. By way of contrast we might imagine how a squad of soldiers invading an enemy village would organise their journey into an unknown territory or an ambulance crew in search of a reported heart attack sufferer would plan how to reach them (Ikeya 2003). Talking about the places and activities is already beginning the day ahead. A day ahead that really ought to be fun, relaxing and enjoyable. And we know how this ‘ought to be fun’ can weigh heavily on a family on a daytrip. For friends, recognisably attending to their status as friends, an overly confident reading of the map could be heard as taking command and/or pre-deciding what they will do today. Hesitancies and inconclusiveness are hearable as offering space for one another to add more suggestions, to display interest, enthusiasm or cold feet about what has been mentioned so far. When we encounter them as assembling the beginning of their daytrip, they are listing, pausing, going over, repeating and in so doing opening up what

they might do and they use these methods as ways of being considerate of each other's responses. Decisions, if they are to be made at all, can wait until they are in the places mentioned and can assess whether the pub looks promising or not, whether it has begun to pour with rain, whether a party of school children are swarming over the waterfalls or any of the other normal hazards of a day out

Dropping Off

Having examined the logics of two journeys – running the family and daytripping with friends – I'll sum up here and return to some comments about the Habitable Cars project.

It's no surprise, I'm sure, if I say that technologies do not determine the ways in which they are used. Nor do they impact, like a meteor, on the surface of planet family or into the sofa of friendship. If the social studies of technology have taught us anything it is surely that technology is social through and through and society is technological from its inception. Automobility nevertheless often falls back into those familiar tropes and in its case, of not merely the technology that *impacted* on the planet's surface, it is the technology that *ate* the planet. And when automobility is massed into a classic mega-technical system, in the style of Lewis Mumford, then it is assumed that it requires wholesale abandonment, or, at the very least, mega-technical-fixes. Just as there was never a pure technology empty of society in the first place, there can be no pure technical solution. Everywhere there are, as Bruno Latour (1999) puts it, imbroglgios of life, machinery and less animate matter involved in locally producing pockets and patchworks of order.

By and large the Habitable Cars project is routed through the *practical* and *humdrum* rather than the grand theoretical problems of travelling together and sharing vehicles. Taking a perspective based in mundane reasoning and action's accomplishments calls for a distinct shift into the whatness of driving and passengering. It calls for a re-orientation to the problems of the inhabitants of vehicles rather than the problems raised by this or that disengaged theory. Given that so much more is going on, a fruitful line of inquiry is into how categorially-assigned responsibilities and moral assessment of the actions of *driver* and *passenger(s)* (WATSON 1999), are played out in potential conflict with other relevant, to use a Sacksian (Sacks 1992) term, *standardised relational pairs* such as husband-wife, manager-trainee, friend-friend, provider-client and parent-child. Under one category encumbency one ought to be attentive to the vehicle's situation on roads in traffic and at stop offs, and under the other, one ought to be attentive to one's friends, or children or colleagues. (Of course allocating one's attention to driving can be a good way of avoiding attending to one's friends or strangers or colleagues etc.) Alongside these issues of role-responsibility and shared awareness of journey conditions, there are the further practical matters of organising the transportation of the materials that go with the particular jobs of journeys (i.e. groceries, luggage, tools, maps, mountainbikes and laptops etc.). To add still further to this complexity, in each and every journey, the planning and accomplishment of parking, refuelling, loading and unloading in tandem with navigating, meeting, planning, listening to news etc. vary dramatically according to vehicle type, ownership, rights of use and distributions of cars parks, garages, pick ups, drop offs and destinations.

What happens, then, before, during and after car journeys are clearly not all of a kind. Each car journey is part of some enterprise: running the family or going off on a hiking trip with friends or dashing to the shops before they close or going home from the office or buying flat-packed shelves at IKEA or meeting clients. These journeys have different priorities, different obligations, different arrangements of their timespaces, different loads, different moods and expectations. Each journey comes not only with

features that will make it properly what it is but with populations that populate it: families, friends, colleagues, clients, husbands and wives, travelling sales workers, and more. How each fits, and instructably so, the car to their purposes varies. It is easy to forget because inhabiting the car, like inhabiting the house, is such a familiar skill that it is as a technical skill at all. Hayden and myself having had a baby recently (not together) have been reminded of how the car becomes a site for instruction. We are learning how things can be done with it as a local arrangement of equipment. We have been adapting seats, changing the way we drive, changing the journeys we are making and in various other ways learning from other parents, instruction manuals, recommendations and more what this new job of driving as parents could involve.

It was Danny Miller's (1998) study of folks at the supermarkets that showed the limits of all too many rational actor or post-modern identity accounts of consumerism. In amongst other affairs he showed how shopping was bound up with loving and caring for others, be they children, girlfriends, husbands or friends. Allyson Noble in her doctoral research on bus travel shows how even the seemingly instrumental and mechanical occasion of the queue provides a further occasion for displays of both selfishness and generosity in the city (Raffel 2001). Up until now the car has suffered from being studied as a formally rational means of getting from A to B and, as noted earlier, tied in with individual selfishness. What I hope you have gotten a sense of from the talk is that we can investigate the journeying car as a perspicuous setting for all the frustration, enjoyment, irritation and excitement of co-habiting technology.

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